

## **Mercenary Writers of British Propaganda in Mexico During the Second World War \***

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### **Abstract**

Thousands of news articles, editorials and features claiming to be written by Mexican journalists, political commentators or military specialists, were produced by writers in the pay of British propaganda agencies during the Second World War in Mexico. The acknowledgement of this fabrication may prevent historians from using content analysis of news items, cartoons and editorials in Mexican press as a reliable source for the analysis of public opinion during these years.

Unchecked or tolerated by the Mexican government, the use of hired writers resulted in rampant editorial distortion towards the Allied cause and imposition of their agenda within the public sphere. Many factors led to extensive manipulation of public opinion in Mexico. Among them were media's dependence upon foreign newsprint, the lack of national wire services and blackmailing from advertisers.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Press in Mexico in the Early Forties**

In 1940, Mexico's population was nearly twenty million, of whom less than 50 per cent were literate. Mexico's print media were highly concentrated regionally. In the capital, the leading commercial newspapers were six morning dailies: four independent, and two the mouthpieces of the government party and the main labor union.<sup>2</sup> In the provinces there were approximately one hundred and thirty newspapers, very uneven in scope, circulation and resources. American propagandists reckoned eighty-three newspapers as "small" and forty-one "intermediate-sized". They deemed relevant only the thirty magazines of the capital.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, London; Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2000. p. 495

<sup>2</sup> The independent morning papers were *El Universal* and *Excelsior* (with daily circulation of around 70,000 and 50,000 respectively), *Novedades* (daily circulation, around 40,000) and *La Prensa* (sensationalist tabloid, daily circulation around 32,000). *El Nacional* and *El Popular*, were respectively the organs of the *Partido de la Revolución Mexicana* (PRM, later PRI) and of the *Confederación de Trabajadores de México* (CTM). *El Universal* and *Excelsior*, had also afternoon editions: *El Universal Gráfico* and *Últimas Noticias*, respectively. Circulation figures were taken from NAW, RG 229, Entry 1, General Records, Commercial and Financial Development, Advertising, Box 138, "ND CAR-11, ND CAR 35, American Social Surveys, Export Information Bureau # 13", Letter No. 37, From Harold J. Corson to Hadley Cantril. May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1941

<sup>3</sup> National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group (hereafter, NARA, RG) RG 59, 811.20212/60. From Herbert Bursley to the Secretary of State, December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1942.

British propaganda agents reckoned the Mexican press as lacking “a high standard of independent or intelligent journalism”.<sup>4</sup> Even the best papers seldom evinced definite editorial policies, because sales revenues directly conditioned its attitude toward the war. Hence, the editorial stance of a given daily seemed to reflect the relative amount of Allied and German advertising and publicity obtained.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, through much of Mexico’s modern history, it was timeworn practice to fix editors or reporters to portray propaganda as news to influence editorial policy (a genre of journalism locally known as *gacetillas*).<sup>6</sup> The gateways of the Mexican media were then wide open for foreign propagandists to frame the war news according to their business interests. To achieve this objective, amid other tactics, they hired well-known Mexican writers and paid them for placing their articles in newspapers and magazines.

Beyond the fact that a celebrated writer would probably be less suspicious to local readers regarding his possible commitments to foreign agents, this strategy tended to shape public perceptions about the war and its main contenders.

Because German propagandists had bought off a considerable part of the Mexican press, French, British and American businessmen threatened to pull their advertising and newsprint from media outlets that supported the Nazis.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, they set up unauthorized desks to manage their propaganda activities and looked for Mexicans to work as stooge writers.

### **The Mexican Press and the British propaganda office**

On account of the oil dispute caused by the expropriation of the foreign petroleum companies by the Mexican government in March 1938, Great Britain and Mexico severed diplomatic relations; that state of affairs persisted in autumn 1939. When war became imminent, the British Ministry of Information (MOI) appointed Robert H. K. Marett as a counselor for Mexican political affairs. A man in his early thirties, with seven years of experience in Mexico in the *Shell* petroleum company, Marett had been put in jail after the expropriation of this company. After being released, he acted as the only foreign correspondent of *The Times* for several weeks until his return to London. In

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<sup>4</sup> PRO FO 371 33994, From Mr. Bateman to Mr Eden, February 20, 1943: “Annual Report for Mexico for 1942”, (Enclosure, p. 6)

<sup>5</sup> PRO FO 371/26075, “Report on the Organization of the Allied Publicity in Mexico”, January 17, 1941, and PRO, FO 371/33994, “Annual Report for Mexico for 1942”.

<sup>6</sup> “Though these *gacetillas* are difficult to recognize, they probably constituted some 60 percent of the total magazine pages in *Hoy* and *Mañana*. Moreover government advertising went much further than subsidizing self-praise for its functionaries; given the vast number of nationalized businesses (...) the government was easily the country’s largest advertiser”. See: John Mraz, “Today, Tomorrow and Always: The Golden Age of Illustrated Magazines in Mexico, 1937–1960,” p. 123: in *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940*. Edited by Gilbert M Joseph, Anne Rubenstein and Eric Zolov (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001). See also: Joe Keenan, “La Gacetrilla: How Advertising Masquerades the News,” in William A. Orme Jr. (Editor), *A Culture of Collusion: An Inside Look at the Mexican Press*, (Boulder, Co.: University of Miami, North South Center, 1997), pp. 41-48.

<sup>7</sup> See: Verena Radkau, “Los Nacionalsocialistas en México”, p. 168, in *Los empresarios alemanes, el Tercer Reich y la oposición de derecha a Cárdenas (II)*, Edited by Brigida von Mentz, Verena Radkau, Daniela Spenser and Ricardo Pérez Montfort, México: CIESAS, Ediciones de la Casa Chata, 1988.

1939 he published "An Eye Witness to Mexico", a book that caught the attention of the Foreign Office which hired him as a propagandist and sent him back to Mexico to work for the newly created Ministry of Information.<sup>8</sup>

On August 29<sup>th</sup> 1939, Marett sketched some ideas about the attitudes of the Mexican people toward Great Britain and developed an information program. He explained that American news agencies were practically the only suppliers of the leading newspapers, leaving the British competitors in an exceedingly difficult situation. Editorial opinions about the European war came mainly from American sources.<sup>9</sup>

A few days after the Second World War broke out, Marett still posted in London, presented the Latin American Division of the Ministry of Information with the document "Propaganda in Mexico". In this study, he reckoned it "highly undesirable" to disseminate propaganda through the British Consulate General, the only official channel available in the country. He also thought, however, that there was considerable scope for British publicity, provided that this could be orchestrated "in an unofficial and tactful way". To this end, Marett recommended establishing in Mexico a press office disguised as a private enterprise.<sup>10</sup> His idea had already been put into practice a few weeks earlier by the British Consul General in Mexico, Thomas Ifor Rees, who formed and chaired the "Inter-Allied Committee of Propaganda" (IACP), composed of the most influential British expatriates and of representatives from the French, Polish, Dutch, Belgian, Greek and Jewish communities in Mexico.<sup>11</sup> The IACP, moreover, created the "Allied Information Office" (AIO) as a *longa manus* to stir up sympathy for the Allied cause in Mexican public opinion through a subcommittee in charge of publicity activities.<sup>12</sup>

Marett embarked for Mexico on October 21<sup>st</sup> 1939. After a brief stop in New York, he arrived in Mexico the first week of September.<sup>13</sup> By mid-March 1940, he co-chaired the AIO with Jacques Soustelle, a well-known French anthropologist and expert on Mexico's indigenous cultures.<sup>14</sup> The British took responsibility for most of the

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<sup>8</sup> He titled the book: *An Eyewitness to Mexico*, Oxford University Press, The Rowerinf Press, Plymouth, England, 1939. Years later he wrote his experiences as propagandist: *Through the Back Door: An Inside View of Britain's Overseas Information Services*. Pergamon Press. 1968. Cfr. PRO 930/111, "Mr. R. H. K. Marett. Details of experience, etc". Document sent to Mexico City Consul General, September 8th, 1939.

<sup>9</sup> National Archives of England, Public Records Office, Foreign Office (hereafter, PRO, FO), 930/111, "Ministry of Information. Latin America. Mexico". Marett even pointed out: "To a very considerable extent then, the Mexican press can be considered to be an extension of the American press". The document at the Archives lacks its last page, where probably its date appeared, but from this quote we can state that it was written when the war seemed imminent: "That in the event of a war breaking out, conditions should be more favourable": its most likely date is August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1939, which we will use henceforth.

<sup>10</sup> PRO FO 930/111, "Propaganda in Mexico", by Robert H. K. Marett, September 8th, 1939

<sup>11</sup> PRO FO 371 22780, Letters dated October 7th and 14th, 1939, and PRO, FO 371 26087, "From Thomas Ifor Rees to Anthony Eden", November 26th, 1941.

<sup>12</sup> Marett had moved to London to work for the Shell Petroleum Company some time between the end of 1938 and the summer of 1939. PRO 930/111, "Mr. R. H. K. Marett. Details of experience, etc". Document sent to Mexico City Consul General, September 8th, 1939.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. PRO FO 371 22780, Correspondence exchanged on October 7th and 14th, 1939

<sup>14</sup> Following the fall of France, General Charles de Gaulle named Soustelle to be the representative of the "Free French Movement" in Mexico. The anthropologist thereupon established a Press Bureau that worked on very close terms with the AIO. See: Denis Rolland, *Vichy et la France Libre au Mexique. Guerre, Cultures et Propagandes Pendant la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: L' Harmattan, 1990), pp. 73-74.

operational burden of the Inter-Allied Committee and of the AIO; the Free French Press kept working closely with it.<sup>15</sup>

At the outset of the war, the British Consul General calculated it would cost at least 500 sterling pounds a month to undertake a thorough and effective publicity effort to exert “control [over] well established local papers with morning and afternoon editions”.<sup>16</sup> Since the Mexican editors were “excessively mercenary”, the Press Assistant considered it “essential to have in hand a sum of money for special payments to the metropolitan press”.<sup>17</sup>

One of the tactics to stamp out German propaganda was to recruit writers to publish as many articles as possible towards achieving British objectives and information guidelines.

### **Objectives of the British Press Propaganda in Mexico**

In 1941 Robert Marett described these basic aims for British propaganda in Mexico: (1) to convert as many Mexicans as possible to the Allied cause and to supply the adherents with enough information to back them up; (2) to convince the Mexicans of the future victory of the Allies and of its benefits for all mankind; (3) to explain the war as a fight against a false notion of racial superiority, a tenet of Nazism to enslave the world, and (4) to thwart the aims of Germany in Mexico by rebutting their propaganda.<sup>18</sup>

The AIO devised three objectives in its information strategy to improve the attitude of the Mexican press towards the Allies: (1) ensure an adequate supply of news, commentaries, features articles, photographs, etc., seeking to obtain maximum exposure for them; (2) secure a fair presentation of the Allied cause in the main newspapers and magazines; (3) disseminate more information about the Allies by creating special organs in the Mexican press.<sup>19</sup>

To achieve these objectives, the AIO granted a subsidy to ANTA, a former Mexican subsidiary of the French agency Havas, controlled by the Germans after the fall of France in June 1940. As a result of the financial support, ANTA offered the British news service Reuter, which successfully reached newspapers in Mexico City and the interior. In addition, they followed a different method for using the telegrams of the London-based news agency Empax: they would send them first to the Allied Information Office for translation and then they would come back to ANTA for distribution. In November 1940, ANTA published 126 items under this system. Likewise, they increased the number of articles, photographs, maps, cartoons, etc., furnished daily by the Allied Information Office. Out of 154 articles published in that month, only 80 were

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<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, for as long as mid-1942, the French community in Mexico covered half of the substantial expenses of the Allied Information Office. These same Frenchmen also financed the much lower propaganda outlays of the “Free French Movement” in Mexico. See: PRO FO 930/112, “Mexico Budget 1942-43”, June 16th, 1942.

<sup>16</sup> PRO FO 930/111, “Telegram from Consul General Mexico City”, September 8th, 1939.

<sup>17</sup> PRO FO 930/112, “Mexico Budget - 1942/43”, Paper No. 1378, June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1942.

<sup>18</sup> PRO FO 371 26075 “Report on the Organization of Allied Publicity in Mexico”, January 17th, 1941

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

from the Ministry of Information. Finally, the Franco-British propagandists set up *Servicio Mundial*, a dummy Mexican news agency financed and controlled by the AIO to provide the provincial papers with regular feature and “crisis” articles.<sup>20</sup>

### Hiring Mexican Writers

British propagandists hired a significant number of Mexican authors and scholars to ensure the publication of articles and editorials. For Mexico City periodicals, the standard rate was 30 Mexican pesos (equal to 1.54 pounds sterling) per article, paid after its publication. This was a satisfactory method because an article by a well-known Mexican seemed more spontaneous and carried more weight than one written by an anonymous or a stranger. In addition, the author himself was responsible for having his article published by the periodicals.<sup>21</sup>

The placing of items was divided into two sections: one for the metropolitan periodicals and another for the provinces. The former depended directly on the Press Bureau at the Allied Information Office; the latter on Allied Sources and *Servicio Mundial*, for feature articles going to 40 odd provincial papers, 25 of which were considered regular customers. Both divisions used ANTA/Reuter for “hot news”.

The system for regional papers followed the pattern of the Press Office with metropolitan periodicals: local journalists, who received 20 to 30 pesos per article, wrote 13 to 15 items per month. As an average of 25 were published, Marett reckoned the average cost as “negligible —no more not less than one peso per article!” (sic)<sup>22</sup>

### Writers hired by the Allied Information Office

Prominent writers like Miguel Alessio Robles (1884-1951) worked for the British Press Office in Mexico. A former Minister of the Treasury (1923-1924) and a Member of the Mexican Academy of Language (Academia Mexicana de la Lengua), Alessio Robles was a prolific writer. His numerous articles for the Allied Information Office appeared every Monday in Mexico’s City famous daily *El Universal*; and *Servicio Mundial* used them to distribute newspapers in the provinces with great success.<sup>23</sup> Another significant hired writer was Enrique Guardiola Cardellach, a Spanish anti-fascist émigré, the former Director of *Las Noticias* of Barcelona, who published in Mexico *La Anti-España* (1938). Among paid writers in *Novedades* were Juan Gaillard, Benito Xavier Pérez Verdia and Jorge de Pallars.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> PRO FO 371 26075 “Report on the Organization of Allied Publicity in Mexico”, January 17th, 1941

<sup>21</sup> PRO FO 371 26075 “Report on the Organization of Allied Publicity in Mexico”, January 17th, 1941

<sup>22</sup> PRO FO 371 26075 “Report on the Organization of Allied Publicity in Mexico”, January 17th, 1941

<sup>23</sup> The article “Napoleón y Hitler”, from November 2nd, 1942, was also published in *El Porvenir* (from Monterrey), *El Informador* (from Guadalajara) and *El Dictamen* (from Mérida). Likewise, “Stalingrado”, published on November 4th, 1942 in *Diario de Durango*, *El Informador*, and *El Porvenir*. See: PRO FO 33983,

<sup>24</sup> PRO FO 33983, *passim*

Despite the Allied and Mexican Government's efforts to do away with German information activities in the country, public opinion still continued to garner the sympathies of the Mexicans at a time when Germany appeared invincible.<sup>25</sup>

### **Money makes the world go Allied**

With a 1942 budget for propaganda operational expenditures of £71,941 from the British Ministry of Information, that year Mexico ranked third behind Argentina (£77,032) and Brazil (£74,344). The total for all Latin American countries was £370,044.<sup>26</sup> Their staff had grown from 19 in November 1940 to 51 in December 1941, when they had 34 paid employees, two full time volunteers plus 15 on a part time basis. Even so, they asked for a larger budget for 1942-43 (apparently from October 1942 to September 1943). The Ambassador pleaded:

I consider important that at a time when our Mexican supporters are depressed and our opponents (who are still numerous) elated by our military setbacks, no reasonable expense should be spared to maintain and intensify our propaganda.<sup>27</sup>

The request was accepted; it meant an increase of 80 percent for activities in the press field. From the £4,072 (79,200 pesos) approved for Press Publicity, £2,005 (39,000 pesos) was for bribes for the capital's periodicals and £617 (12,000 pesos) was for *Servicio Mundial*, which implied hiring more writers. The rest of the approved budget was for subsidizing *ANTA*, which practically gave away its news, the purchase of a complete page in *Novedades*, and for a "subsidy" to the Second Edition of *Últimas Noticias*.<sup>28</sup>

The greatest amount of money destined for the capital's press was justified because:

The Press Assistant considers it essential to have in hand a sum of money for special payments to the metropolitan press, which is exceedingly mercenary. The number of articles placed in the metropolitan daily, weekly and magazine press by the Allied Committee in January and February 1942 was 347 and 379 respectively, the monthly average in 1941 having been about 420.<sup>29</sup>

Within the balance sheet provided to the Ministry of Information, they accounted for the bribing of Mexican journalists:

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<sup>25</sup> See José Luis Ortiz Garza, *Ideas en tormenta: la opinión pública en México y la Segunda Guerra Mundial*, México, Ruz Ediciones, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> PRO INF 1/146, Reorganization of the Ministry of Information. Latin American Division, "Latin America Operational Expenditure", September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1942. We did not find budgets neither before nor after this year, which, in any case, seemed crucial in regards to the war and to the psychological warfare in Mexico. An additional amount (as much as 40 percent) was paid by the Inter-Allied Committee of Propaganda.

<sup>27</sup> PRO FO 930/112, "Mexico Budget - 1942/43", Paper No. 1378, June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1942.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Under this heading ["paid articles"] fall the fees we pay to Mexican writers and columnists for publishing pro-Ally material. In my opinion it is a most important item –and one, which gives immediate results.<sup>30</sup>

In regards to the budget proposed for the press in the provinces, they explained:

This sum is to improve and expand *Servicio Mundial*, the very successful provincial feature article agency. The Americans are paying to obtain press publicity in the provinces, but *Servicio Mundial* will continue to place articles without making any payment.<sup>31</sup>

In February 1942, this agency distributed 600 text-only articles, plus 50 with photographic support, 45 caricatures, and 316 separate photographs. The output was to be improved by purchasing articles from good Mexican writers, and to be augmented by larger distributions of blocks, maps, diagrams, etc.

The number of items (paid and unpaid) placed by the AIO in the metropolitan daily, weekly and magazine press in January and February 1942 was 347 and 379, respectively. With the approval of the new budget, results soared: March, 516; April, 801; May, 845; June, 951; July, 891; August, 792; September, 651; October, 855 and November, the last month registered, 912. While the monthly average in 1941 was about 420 paid articles in the capital's press, in 1942 it went up to 681 in only eleven months.<sup>32</sup>

### **A more influential force in the public sphere than the Mexican Government itself**

The well-oiled machinery of the British propaganda surpassed by far the efforts of the Mexican government press office. According to the annual report of the "Dirección General de Información" (General Directorate of Information), a branch of the Secretaría de Gobernación (Ministry of Interior), between September 1<sup>st</sup> 1942 and August 31<sup>st</sup> they produced 834 exclusive news items and 315 news features for the press in the capital.<sup>33</sup>

The disproportion between the news items churned out from the Mexican government and the British propagandists came as a result of the employees working at each agency. While in March 1944 the Dirección General de Información employed 30 persons (full-time staff, and commission agents), the Inter-Allied Committee of Information and the Allied Information Office staffed 50 full-time people, 85 volunteers and 500 loose agents.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> PRO FO 930/112, "Mexico Budget - 1942/43", Paper No. 1378, June 16th, 1942.

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. FO 371 33983, "Comparative Statement of Articles Placed by Press Office in Metropolitan and Press & Periodicals".

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. AGN, Dirección General de Información (DGI), Caja 244, 103.2/4, "Informe de las labores llevadas a cabo por el Departamento de Información General de la Dirección General de Información, del 1º de Septiembre de 1942 al 31 de agosto de 1943".

<sup>34</sup> Cfr. AGN, DGI, Caja 244, 103.5/1, "Relación del personal de planta y comisionado que presta sus servicios en el Departamento de Información General", March 25th, 1944. PRO FO 371 38314, "Plan of Propaganda for Mexico", January 1st and June 27th, 1944.

In 1944 *Servicio Mundial* was housed in the British Press Office and took over some of the services that were supplied to the provincial press, alleviating duplication.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusions

How the manipulation of news and opinions offered by the local journalists in the British payroll were supported or refuted by the Mexican audiences is difficult to grasp, since even nowadays there is “little firm evidence of confirmed relationships between the mass media and matters of values, beliefs, opinions and social attitudes.”<sup>36</sup> However, we may extract an interesting lesson from the British propagandists with regard to their strategy on the basis of the agenda setting theory and its corollary: that framing the Mexican mind would offset the German psychological warfare in Mexico.

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<sup>35</sup> Cfr. FO 371 38314 “Plan of Propaganda for Mexico. Second Revision of Channels”, June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1944

<sup>36</sup> Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, London; Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2000. op. cit., p. 459



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